



File Code: 1950

Date: September 13, 2017

The Bitterroot National Forest is proposing vegetation management, fuels reduction, and transportation system management in the Darby Lumber Lands Phase 2 project area (Fig. 1). The Darby Lumber Lands Phase 2 project encompasses approximately 27,453 acres in Rye Creek, Little Sleeping Child Creek, Harlan Creek, Roan Gulch, Burke Gulch, North Fork Rye Creek, Rye Creek and Robbins Gulch drainages in the Sapphire mountain range, east of Darby, Montana.

This letter's purpose is to share information about the proposed project and to gather information and comments from you. In this letter, I provide a description of the project, the need for action, proposed activities, and how you can participate in the process and comment on the proposal.

Public Involvement

This notice is being sent out to seek further input in the development and preparation of the project. I encourage the participation of interested persons, state and local governments, and Indian tribes at this time and throughout the remainder of the planning and analysis process.

Location and Background

The proposal is in the Sapphire Mountains east of Darby, on the Darby-Sula Ranger District (Map 1). The area is accessed by the public mainly through Robbins Gulch, Rye Creek and North Fork Rye Roads, with less use coming indirectly from Sleeping Child and the White Stallion Camp areas. Several sections have been recently acquired through land exchange or direct acquisition.

Vegetation varies from grass and shrub-covered foothills to Ponderosa pine and mixed conifer stands of various ages. Fires burned through the area in 2000, resetting much of the forested area to young sapling stands while leaving some mature stands untouched.

The Darby Lumber Lands Phase 2 project proposal was developed from recommendations by an interdisciplinary team of resource specialists, including fire/fuels, silviculture, hydrology and soils. This project is a continuation of the watershed improvement and transportation management work in Rye Creek completed in the first phase of the Darby Lumber Lands Watershed Improvement and Travel Management Project (Decision July, 2015). Phase 2 also incorporates vegetation management activities. The proposed vegetation management activities were added to provide timber to support the Forest Service's multiple use mandate. These proposed activities were integrated in one project to improve landscape management efficiency and better estimate and mitigate effects. The vegetation management is also expected to reduce potential fire severity, reduce Douglas fir mistletoe outbreak, and move several dry Ponderosa Pine sites closer to their historic condition.

A review of forest stands within the project area found several that could be commercially treated to provide timber for local markets. They are located within management areas designated for timber management and the proposed harvest is consistent with forest plan standards. Thinning activities would favor leaving mature Ponderosa pine occupying the site at historic densities. There are two diseased Douglas fir stands that are proposed for clearcutting that would be replanted to Ponderosa pine after harvest.

The project area, including both recently acquired and historic Forest Service lands, has extensive road systems built decades ago for timber management. Many roads on recently acquired Darby Lumber Co.



sections were not built to Forest Service standards and have not been maintained for up to 25 years. Erosion on these roads negatively affects water resources by chronically elevating sediment levels, degrading native fisheries habitat and adversely affecting beneficial uses downstream. The Montana Department of Environmental Quality has listed two of the major streams in the analysis area (North Fork Rye and Rye Creeks) as water-quality impaired with native-surface forest roads listed as the probable pollutant sources.

All lands in the project area are under Forest Plan management area designations supporting timber production and motorized access, creating a need to maintain long-term access. However, changes in timber harvesting methods have made some roads unneeded for future management. Many are currently closed to public motorized access or inaccessible for various reasons. The project's proposed road system would support modern timber management, improve environmental conditions and improve recreation-access. This area was included in the 2016 Forest-wide Travel Management Planning decision. The District Ranger has determined it is appropriate to consider the area in more detail due to recent land exchanges, land acquisition and ongoing road and access-related issues not resolved by the Forest-wide decision.

Purpose and Need

This project is being designed to:

1. Design and implement a suitable transportation system for long-term land management that is responsive to public interests and reduces adverse environmental effects.
2. Improve forest health and stand resilience, restore historic structure in dry pine stands and reduce potential fire severity
3. Provide timber products and related jobs.

Proposed Action

The proposed action was developed to meet the needs listed above. The proposed action includes:

1. Commercially harvesting on about 1,260 acres of dry pine sites. The vegetation management activities would provide timber to the wood products industry and support associated jobs. Proposed activities would also move dry pine stands closer to historic conditions, reduce potential fire severity and increase stand resilience to disturbance by removing competing Douglas fir and increasing spacing between remaining trees. In two different harvest units of 95 and 40 acres, the existing stand would be clear-cut due to its current diseased condition and makeup (Table A-1 & Map 1).
2. Prescribed burning of the harvest units and an additional 57-acre open pine/grassland site. Prescribed burning would reduce activity fuels, rejuvenate wildlife forage, and help return fire to a landscape that developed with fire (Table A-1 & Map 1).
3. Building system and temporary roads needed to complete vegetation management activities. Several stands proposed for vegetation management do not have road access. The minimum road system needed to complete harvest activities would be built but most of the new road would be closed to public access during and after the project. A portion of FR74985 on the Little Sleeping Child/Harlan Creek divide would be relocated, and the old road segment decommissioned. The new road segment would have the same travel status as the old road, which is currently open seasonally. About 4.3 miles of permanent specified road and 4.4 miles

temporary roads would be built along with tracked line machine and constructed skid trails. An access road across private land would be improved prior to log haul. Temporary roads, tracked line machine trails and skid trails would be re-contoured and revegetated after use (Table A-1 & Map 1). Of the new permanent road constructed, only the FR74985 relocation segment would be open to the public after or during the vegetation management activities; this road is currently open for public motorized use on a seasonal basis and would be managed the same way after the project.

4. Changing access on specific existing roads and trails. The goals of this action are to provide more logical access, such as matching seasonal restrictions or year-round access on associated or joining roads. Several currently closed roads would be opened for OHVs < 50" in width, and combined with connector trails (number 6, below) to provide recreational access. (Tables A-2 through A-4 & Map 2)
 - a. Approximately 1,900' (0.36 mi.) of trail TR504 (Rye Creek-Hot Springs Trail), in S35, T4N, R20W would be changed from TR-3, single track motorized, to TR-3, OHV <50" in width, to allow this class of vehicle access from where FR73985 crosses TR504 to the top of Cold Spring Hill. Minor blading and new drainage features would be needed. The remaining portion of TR504 would remain single track as designated in the 2016 Travel Management Planning decision.
 - b. Specific currently stored roads FR73975, 73982 and 73985 would be opened, and combined with 4 (a), above, or number 6, below, to provide OHV <50" routes.
 - c. Specific roads would be closed, opened or their seasons or vehicle class changed to achieve the purpose and need for managing the transportation system.
5. Storing and decommissioning specific unneeded road and trails.
 - a. There are approximately 35 miles of existing road prism that are no longer needed for management activities due to changes in harvest technology or duplicate access, and provide only minor access for recreation or other uses (Table A-5, Map 3). These routes are proposed for decommissioning. Several of the currently open road segments listed for closure in Table 2 are also decommissioning candidates in Table 5. These decommissioned roads would be removed from the system and treated, as appropriate, to improve soil and watershed conditions. Decommissioning and storage candidates with substantial natural recovery and negligible erosion risk may receive minimal or no treatment. Where required, the proposed treatments for decommissioned and stored roads may include soil decompaction, culvert removal, full and partial re-contouring and revegetation treatments. Unless natural recovery has made the roads inaccessible to motorized vehicles, the entrances of the roads would be physically blocked with a gate, earthen berm, rock barrier, or the first 50 to 100 feet would be recontoured.
 - b. There are about 16 miles of existing roads not needed for short-term management but are needed long-term to support Forest Plan direction, most specifically for timber management (Table 6, Map 3). These roads would be stored and would be treated as necessary to ensure hydrologic stability. They would not be available for motorized access when in storage.
 - c. TR164 (Little Sleeping Child) would be removed from the trail system (Map 2). Access to this trail has been extremely limited for many years due to both fire-related downfall

and private land road access issues. Removing this trail from the system responds to the need to reduce trail maintenance costs and focus on routes that are more accessible.

6. Building two new OHV (<50" in width) connector trails, totaling about 0.7 miles, to improve the recreational OHV experience in the upper Little Sleeping Child/Lairdon Gulch area (Map 2). Proposed new connector trail activities would include chainsaw clearing of downed trees, blading a tread sufficient for OHV (<50" in width) and establishing water drainage features where needed.

Please see information this scoping letter refers to by clicking on the Darby Lumber Lands Phase 2 link at <http://www.fs.usda.gov/projects/bitterroot/landmanagement/projects>

Project Design Features

Design features are an integral part of any proposed action and serve to mitigate or control environmental impacts of the proposed action on project area resources. The analysis documented in the Environmental Assessment (EA) will disclose the possible adverse and beneficial impacts that may occur from implementing the actions proposed with each alternative. Design measures have been formulated to mitigate or reduce adverse impacts. These measures are guided by the Forest Plan, state and federal law, and policy.

Forest Plan Amendment

The project is expected to meet most of the Forest-wide standards and guidelines, and the Management Area direction as described in the Land and Resource Management Plan. However, there may be a need for site-specific Forest Plan amendments in regards to Elk Habitat Effectiveness (EHE) standards. The project area has 3rd-order drainages that currently do not meet the Forest Plan standard for EHE, and are likely to not meet this standard after implementing the proposed action. The 2012 Planning Rule (36 CFR 219) requires notice of which substantive requirements of sections 219.8 through 219.11 are likely to be related to the amendment. Suspension of the elk habitat effectiveness standard is likely related to the consideration of habitat conditions for wildlife commonly used and enjoyed by the public at § CFR 219.10(a)(5).

Comment Process

Your comments specific to this project and/or to individual sites and resources are valuable in helping the Forest Service identify concerns, develop alternatives to the proposed action, and refine the analysis to focus on issues.

So that your input may be included in the analysis, please provide comments addressing the proposed action by October 13, 2017. If you would like to receive future mailings about this project, please either send us your comments or contact us to let us know that you would like to remain on the mailing list. Please send comments to: Eric Winthers, District Ranger, Darby Ranger District, P.O. Box 388, Darby, MT 59829.

Electronic comments should be sent to comments-northern-bitterroot-Darby@fs.fed.us. For electronically mailed comments, the sender should normally receive an automated electronic acknowledgement from the agency as confirmation of receipt. If the sender does not receive an automated acknowledgement of the receipt of comments, it is the sender's responsibility to ensure timely receipt by other means.

Comments received in response to this solicitation, including names, addresses and e-mail addresses of those who comment, will be considered part of the public record, and will be available for public inspection.

If you need additional information regarding this proposal, please contact me at (406) 821-4244 or Ed Snook at (406) 363-7103, esnook@fs.fed.us

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Eric Winthers", with a stylized flourish at the end.

Eric Winthers
Darby District Ranger